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ABSTRACT

The Connecticut Haitian American community has recently become large enough and sufficiently well established to develop programs to assist economic and educational development in the Republic of Haiti. Southern Connecticut became a destination for large numbers of Haitian emigrants and political refugees in the 1950s, in 1964, and again in 1971. Data on the number of Haitians in Connecticut are difficult to compile because many are unregistered aliens, but communities have developed in the urban areas of sufficient size to have an impact on the public schools and Catholic Church in Stamford, Norwalk, and Bridgeport. Recently organized Haitian American community projects include the following: (1) Hunger Relief and Development, Inc., designed to provide direct food, medical, and educational aid to the disadvantaged in Haiti; (2) the Haitian Ministries Office, a Catholic Church-sponsored organization designed to provide services to the poor in Port-au Prince, Haiti; (3) the Connecticut Haitian American Society, Inc., designed to educate Americans about Haiti and to preserve Haitian culture in the United States; and (4) University of Connecticut programs, designed to provide colloquia on Haitian affairs, field trips to Haiti, and training for health care personnel in Haiti. Two maps and a short list of references are included. (FMW)

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THE CONNECTICUT-HAITIAN CONNECTION: DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN THE CARIBBEAN AND NEW ENGLAND

Rosalie Marson Colman
Reneé Schatteman
Frank A. Stone

Panel on
Strategic Planning for Education in the Caribbean
at
The Thirteenth Annual Conference
of the
Caribbean Studies Association,
Pointe-a-Pitre, Guadeloupe, F.W.I.,
May 25-29, 1988

Area Studies Resource Guides,
Number Nine

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Rosalie Marson Colman
Reneé Therese Schatteman
Frank A. Stone

Recently a new level of awareness and interaction has been manifested in voluntary relations between citizens of Connecticut and Haiti. This inquiry is aimed at sketching several aspects of these growing linkages, as well as assessing their potential development and educational impacts in both societies.

The third smallest state in the Union at 4,862 square miles (after Rhode Island and Delaware), in 1986 Connecticut had a population of 3,189,000. White citizens accounted for ninety percent of Connecticut's people, and 6.9 percent were black. The 1986 per capita income in Connecticut was $19,208, the highest in the nation. Overall unemployment was a mere 3.8 percent in 1986 and has since dropped even further.[1]

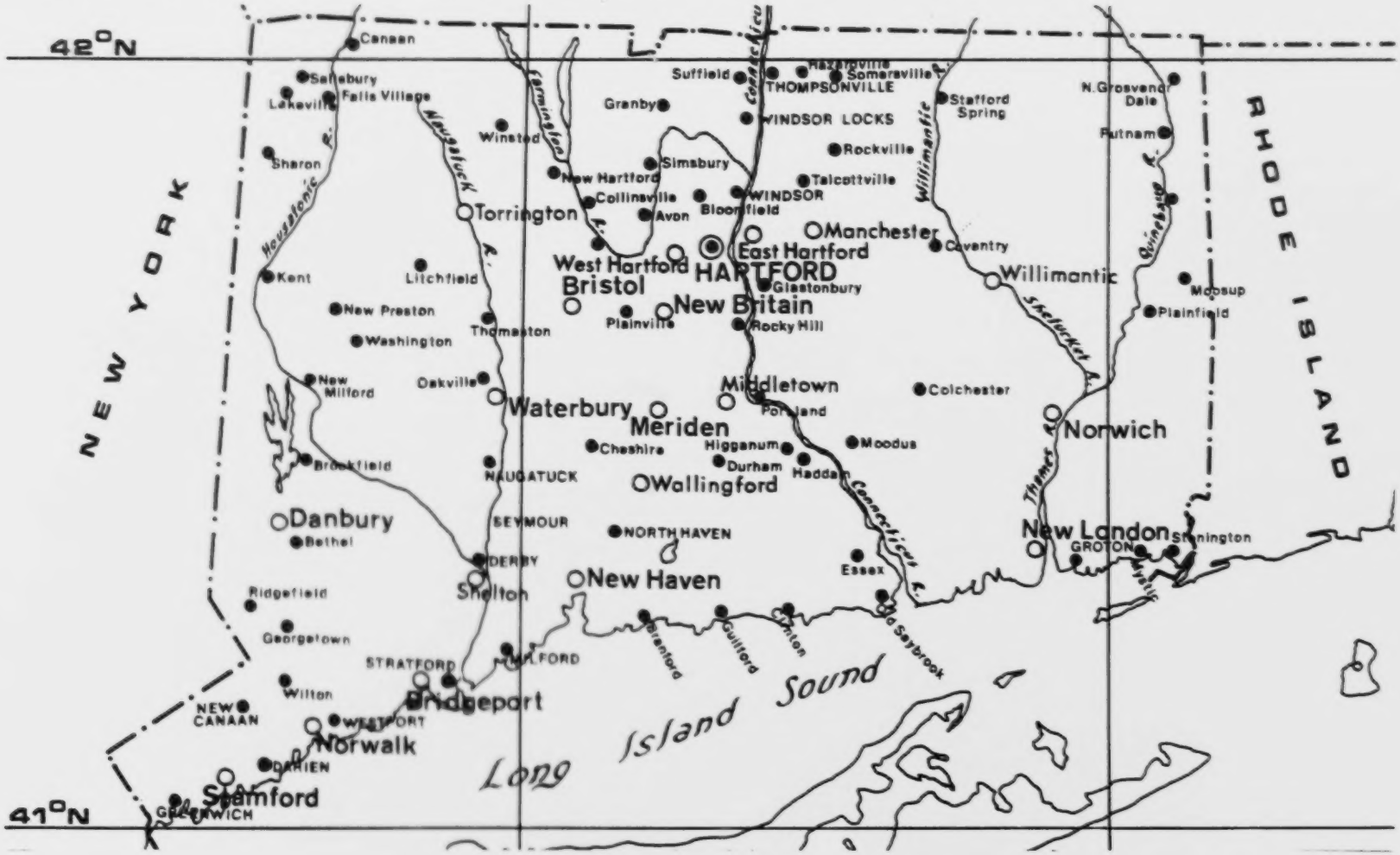
These glowing statistics do not pertain to all of Connecticut, however. Data from cities like Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven and Waterbury read like the third world. The Northeast neighborhood of Hartford, where Stowe Village, a huge public housing complex is located, has an infant mortality rate of over twenty deaths per 1,000 live births. Asylum Hill, home of famous insurance companies and a major hospital, has closer to thirty infants who die for every thousand born. There are more than three hundred teenaged pregancies every year in the City of Hartford alone![2]

A sketchy notion about some of the social problems of urban, poor Connecticut can be obtained from reflecting on these items that were in the minutes of the Clay Hill Improvement Association, a neighborhood group in Hartford, last December.

> Fourteen of the sixteen street lights on the Bedford Street Mall do not work. The city has been contacted.
>
> An abandoned car has been in front of Mr. Barnett's house since summer. The police have been contacted.
>
> To draw kids away from gang activities, inquiries are being made about possible sources of money to pay for more recreation activities at Clay Hill. They hope to find enough money for a recreation counselor.

MAP ONE
CONNECTICUT

Source: Allen R. Smith, Connecticut: A Thematic Atlas. ----------, 1974, p. 6.



> The drug dealers appear to have added a third shift. They are open for business around the clock. The police have been contacted. Again. [3]

The Republic of Haiti in 1986 was estimated to have a population of 5,870,000, virtually all of African origins, living in an area totalling 10,714 square miles in the western third of the island of Hispaniola. Its capital city, Port-au-Prince, alone has over 557,000 inhabitants, many more than any of Connecticut's major cities. The most recent estimate of the per capita income for Haitians made in 1983 was $300 - their's is the poorest nation in the western hemisphere. Literacy among Haitians was reported to be twenty-three percent in 1987. Infant mortality in 1985 was 107 per 1,000 live births. Life expectancy for Haitians at birth in 1985 was 51.2 years for men and 54.4 for women. [4]

What, we may ask, could possibly bring certain people from two such disparate societies as Connecticut and Haiti together?

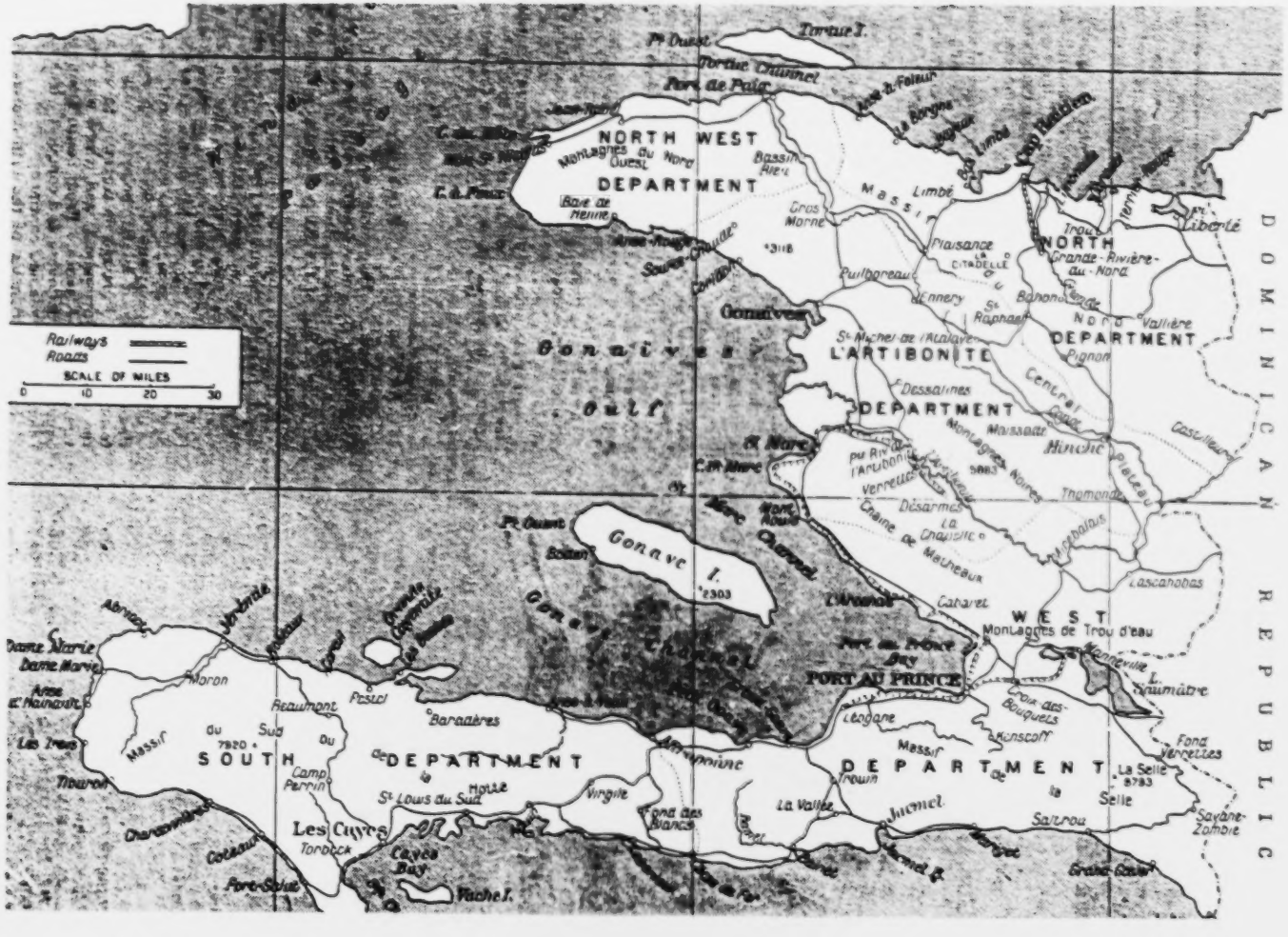
There has been an historic connection because Haiti was a destination for some Connecticut Yankee sea captains in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was a point of their infamous triangle of the slave trade from Africa, sugar from the Caribbean, and rum from southern New England. Later, when the slave trade and finally slavery were abolished, a certain amount of commercial exchanges continued between the two societies into the twentieth century. Haiti traded bananas, cocoa, coffee, rice, sisal and sugar for livestock, grain, fruits and vegetables (and other provisions) as well as manufactured articles.

Located between New York City and Boston, Massachusetts, especially southern Connecticut became a destination for Haitian emigrants and refugees. It appears that the chief Haitian influx into the state started in the 1950's when Dr. Francois Duvalier became the Haitian President and then in 1964, made himself President-for-Life. After his death in 1971, the succession passed to his son, Jean-Claude, and the combination of bad economic and repressive political conditions in Haiti continued producing movements of people from that country to Greater New York, including Fairfield County, Connecticut, where service jobs were abundant.

By 1985, therefore, it was estimated that between five and six thousand Haitian Americans lived in Stamford, CT, a city of just a bit over 100,000 people. Norwalk, CT is also home to several thousand Haitian Americans, as is New Haven. Bridgeport has a Haitian enclave, and probably some five thousand Haitians have settled in the Greater Hartford region of Connecticut. Even Windhan County in northeastern Connecticut has at least

MAP TWO
THE REPUBLIC OF HAITI

Source: Caribbean Year Book, 1979-1980, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Caribook, Ltd., 1980, p. 304.



seventy Haitian families. This data is somewhat sketchy because not all of the Haitian refugees in Connecticut are legally registered aliens. Many, however, are legally in the United States, have obtained work permits, and some are naturalized citizens of the United States. The Connecticut Haitian American community, therefore, has only recently become large enough and sufficiently well established to begin being able to do much for compatriots in the Caribbean motherland.

There are now enough Haitian students attending the high schools in Hartford, Norwalk, and Stamford, CT to warrant Creole-French/English Bilingual education classes for them in these cities. At Norwalk Community College some English as a Second Language (ESL) classes have as many as forty percent Haitian students. Many of them are barely twenty years old. Others are well past thirty. Their backgrounds range from weak schooling to people who have earned advanced degrees.[5]

Many of the Haitian immigrants appear to have come from lower middle class or even the privileged strata of society at home. They have had to struggle in order to reach comparable income and status levels in Connecticut. They have influenced Connecticut education, at least in the towns where they have settled in good-sized numbers. Haitians have also made an impact on the religious scene in Connecticut. Predominantly Roman Catholics, their presence has changed the composition of several parishes. This new visibility helps to account for the attention now being paid to Haiti by other people in the state. Many Haitian immigrants are employed in the service sector, working in hospitals and nursing homes. Others are employed in Connecticut industries, or have white collar jobs at banks and insurance companies. Most of Connecticut's Haitian Americans have aspirations for their children to enter a profession. On the other hand, it is reported that several Haitians are employed at the mushroom "factory" in Franklin, CT, which is unskilled labor.

Our attention will now be focused on four groups in Connecticut that are involved with activities in Haiti.

HUNGER RELIEF AND DEVELOPMENT, INC.

A member of the Connecticut General Assembly, State Representative Vito Mazza of New Haven is the founder and moving spirit of Hunger Relief and Development, Inc. (HRAD). Representative Mazzo is a charismatic personality who has been able to employ his political influence to establish contacts with the officials of large corporations, governmental agencies, and private donors in order to obtain substantial gifts of food, equipment, medical supplies, books and money for disadvantaged people in Haiti.

P.O. BOX 9002 • New Haven, Conn. 06532-0002 • Tel. (203) 468-2338

To Feed the Hungry
To Heal the Sick
To Educate the Young

Most of the information about HRAD was obtained during an interview with Representative Mazza, or from news releases about its work in the mass media. One of the authors of this study also observed Mazza explaining HRAD's work to a group that had gathered for a "Haitian Night" in Willimantic, CT. Mazza explained that HRAD was started nine years ago after his first visit to Haiti. At that time he was struck by the glaring poverty that he witnessed in this country located so close to the United States. Since that first trip, Mazza has gone to Haiti twenty-four more times,so he has become something of an expert on conditions in that country. He has been able to involve as many as four hundred Americans, mostly from Connecticut, in HRAD's relief and development efforts in one way or another. 6

As this background information suggests, HRAD has two primary purposes. It provides assistance to Haitians who live in the slums outside of Port-au-Prince, on the one hand. On the other hand it seeks to conscientize Americans to the realities of third world living. The brochure about HRAD puts its objectives very succinctly: "To feed the hungry. To heal the sick. To educate the young."

The first of these objectives is being achieved with the help of Father Lawrence Bohnen, who heads the Salesian Mission in Haiti. Since 1955, Bohnen has been providing a hot meal to school children everyday. His feeding program now serves some 16,000 children and youth - and often their families as well - with support from AID, CARE, CRS, and OXFAM. HRAD has had a hand in this effort by airlifting surplus food from the United States to Haiti at no cost. Both the food supplies and the air space have been donated, so HRAD hasn't incurred large expenses.

Another way in which HRAD has been able to assist with Bohnen's work is through a program offering Amwericans an opportunity to sponsor a Haitian child. The current cost is $40.00 a year for an individual to feed and educate a child attending one of the mission's schools for a year. Through both the airlifts of food and the sponsor program, HRAD has been able to support about 450 of Bohnen's Haitian children.

Another major emphasis in HRAD's relief work is obtaining medical supplies. Major drug companies in the United States such as Cliniped have donated large shipments of supplies. These were flown down to Haiti by the 143rd Tactical Airlift Group of the U.S. Air Force in Rhode Island. HRAD has so far been able to coordinate several airlifts carrying close to a hundred tons of medical supplies toHaitian hospitals, clinics, and community centers. Each shipment is accompanied by a delegation of HRAD members who make sure that the drugs are properly distributed to the Haitian institutions that will dispense them. This makes another means of exposing Americans to the Haitian scene.

Substantial efforts toward improving educational opportunities for poor children in Haitian is HRAD's third thrust. It adopted St. Monfret's Elementary School, located in a slum area by sending the funding needed to build the classrooms. It is no wonder that HRAD has placed so much emphasis on assisting schools when we realize that the official illiteracy rate in Haiti is over seventy-five percent, and in reality doubtless is even greater.

This brief description demonstrates that HRAD is providing a good-sized amount of direct aid to Haitians entirely free of charge and obligation. The agency obtains goods and funds from individuals and companies in the United States. But the aid is not meant to be simply a hand-out. Rep. Mazza quite adamantly stated that it is intended to help make Haitians more self-reliant, not more dependent. The program directed by Father Bohnen, for example, doesn't require that the students pay back or work for the food that they receive. They are required to attend school regularly, however, and are expected to become part of the next generation of better educated human resources that Haiti needs so badly. Thus the assistance is intended to be a "hand-up" giving poor Haitians the motivation to become literate and productive, at the same time it meets their basic health and nutrition needs.

Hunger Relief and Development, Inc., according to Rep. Mazza, is unique in the United States. It is the only completely volunteer group providing such a large amount of development aid. The nine members of HRAD's executive board, for example, draw no salaries for their work. Every project and each shipment is planned and carried through by teams of volunteers. This requires that the work being done for HRAD be scheduled around the individual's paid jobs. Providing supervision is also harder when all the people involved are volunteers. Yet Mazza believes that the voluntary nature of the organization is an advantage because it insures that the people involved in giving assistance are genuininely concerned with Haiti and the other nations where HRAD now has projects.

THE HAITIAN MINISTRIES OFFICE

There are three ecclesiastical units of Connecticut Roman Catholicism; the dioceses of Bridgeport and Norwich, and the Archdiocese of Hartford. Most of the Haitian Americans in the state reside in communities and parishes in the Bridgeport and Hartford dioceses, but it is the Haitian Ministries Office of the Norwich Diocese that appears to be most active. This arm of the church has been functioning for three or four years, since the bishop and a group of his clergy and laity visited Haiti. The coordinator of the Office is Sister Marilyn Canning, who is kept busy presenting the needs to various audiences in eastern Connecticut, helping to obtain supplies, and making trips to Haiti in order to keep current on conditions there.

HAITIAN MINISTRIES OFFICE

124 Laurel Hill Avenue
Norwich, CT 06360

Phone (203) 887-9635

Last year the first field representatives in Haiti from the Norwich Diocese, Thomas and Jeanne Bright of Griswold, CT, and their children, Caitlin and Colin, took up residence in one of the poorest sections of Port-au-Prince. Tom Bright had previously been the director of Youth Ministries for the Diocese, and Jeanne is an elementary teacher who was also studying for a master's degree at The University of Connecticut. The Brights were to assist by developing liaison with groups such as Catholic Relief Services and Caritas. They would facilitate projects of the diocese such as the "Adopt a Pig" program, through which people from Connecticut parishes give money that is used to buy and distribute pigs for Haitian families to raise for cash or food. They help distribute medical supplies from the William W. Backus Hospital in Norwich to hospitals in Port-au-Prince. They also help distribute school supplies to rural and urban areas in Haiti, and channel support to the St. Joseph Home for Boys in Port-au-Prince that makes it possible for former street boys to live in a better atmosphere. Both of the adult Brights have been teaching and doing community development work in Haiti, as well.[7]

Jeanne Bright has written several reports of their experiences to Frank Stone, one of her professors at UConn. On April 25, 1988 she wrote:

> Now that travel is more possible, we are attempting to visit various projects in the countryside. Our time is so short! We spent the Wednesday through Saturday before Easter in the village of Arniquet, visiting several small projects. We and the children had a wonderful time. All of our communications were in Creole with just a smattering of French, here

> and there. At this point, our Creole is much better than our French. Arniquet is in the southern peninsula, and is much greener and quieter than Port-au-Prince. The projects were inspirational, and the green and quiet were therapeutic. We have acquired a worthy vehicle and driving through the river was a great adventure. Like many other Haitian villages, Arniquet is cut off for a couple of weeks during the rainy seasons. Between the weather and the politics, one could get rather isolated in the provinces. [8]

Jeanne and her family will be returning to eastern Connecticut this summer, and they will become a valuable contact for people in this part of the state who want to know more about Haiti. Jeanne wrote three main aims in her letter.

- Provide Haitians with the opportunity and means to find and implement their own solutions to their unique problems.
- Help Connecticut residents to understand our interdependence and to see a need for an evaluation of lifestyle.
- Encourage Connecticut residents to question United States policy, to demand that the U.S. stop supporting oppressive regimes and use its influence more to enhance human rights and less to protect its power status.[9]

THE CONNECTICUT HAITIAN AMERICAN SOCIETY, INC.

A very interesting and promising new organization was started about two years ago. Named The Connecticut Haitian American Society, Inc. (CONHASO) this group is still getting fully organized. It began when a small group of Haitians living in the Hartford area decided that, with Duvalier out of power in Haiti, Haitian Americans living in Connecticut should come out of hiding and begin to reclaim their cultural ties with their homeland. Most Haitians in the United States previous to this time has avoided speaking out because they feared endangering their families on the island. The following data about CONHASO was obtained in an interview with Joseph and Claudette Darius, two of the organization's founders, who also contributed a copy of the group's constitution and bylaws.

Connecticut Haitian American Society, Inc.

(C O N H A S O)

During the first year of its existence, the founders of CONHASO struggled to secure a committed membership, elect an executive board, and drawup the bylaws to guide the board. Several programs were given during the organizational year, but more effort went into planning future programs and activities. Five central purposes were identified in the CONHASO constitution.

One purpose is to educate Americans about Haiti. Article Two states:

> CONHASO shall be established to serve as a center for the dissemination of information regarding the plights of Haitians both in the United States and Haiti.[10]

Implementing this goal, the members of CONHASO serve as guest speakers at many functions that are organized by other groups. Joseph and Claudette Darius, for example, made a bilingual presentation to over a hundred people at a "Haiti Night" coordinated by The World Education Fellowship, Connecticut Chapter (WEFCONN). At a recent Poverty Dinner at Notre Dame Church in Durham two members of CONHASO spoke about the current situation in Haiti. Others will be making a presentation for HRAD.

According to the Dariuses, CONHASO members believe that talks like these are essential because they help counter negative stereotypes that are in the minds of many Americans when Haiti is mentioned. Americans are likely to associate Haiti with dependency, poverty, vodoo, and the AIDS virus. Since the failed elections in Haiti last year, much American sentiment has become even more negative and unrealistic, according to Mr. Darius. Indications of this are a newly released film, "The Serpent and the Rainbow," which portrays Haitians negatively. There was also a recent exhibit of forty black and white photographs at the Hartford Seminary entitled, "Haiti after Duvalier." These images taken in Haiti in recent months presented a hopeless country filled with helpless people, rather than a nation facing new challenges and opportunities. Mr. Darius comments, "I would like to go back to Haiti with those photo-journalists and show them the side of Haiti they did not see before." [11]

Similar to HRAD, CONHASO would also like to fund assistance programs in Haiti, or at least cooperate with the efforts of other agencies there. A seed program has already been started, whereby CONHASO sends shipments of seeds to an agronomist friend in Haiti, who then takes them out to the rural areas and instructs the villagers about planting and cultivation procedures.

Ideally, CONHASO members would like, themselves, to be able to go to Haiti in order to carry out development projects there. As they see it, however, the situation is still much too dangerous for that to occur. Mr. Darius has been warned by friends that his returning to Haiti now would

be very dangerous. At this point, Claudette interjected her objections, saying, "I want a father for my children." [12] Since the door into Haiti is still closed to them, the members of CONHASO believe that the next most effective approach is to form a strong lobbying group which could have some influence on policies being made in Washington, D.C. They would urge the United States, for example, to aid Haiti with food and charcoal, rather than arms.

CONHASO is also to be, " . . . a medium for communication, support and assistance to the Haitians living in the Greater Hartford area and to cooperate with other communities in similar activities." It is, " . . . to facilitate the integration of Haitians and their culture into the American society." The organization exists to foster a sense of self-pride, a consciousness that Haitian Americans are always also viewed as being representatives of Haiti, and a sense of obligation to try to pay back to Haiti what the immigrants owe it for the educational opportunities that they received in their homeland. Along similar lines, CONHASO is also to strive to "encourage excellence in education amongst Haitian youths,"[13]

Right now CONHASO's membership is about thirty-five people. As time goes on, however, the present members plan to become known to all of the Haitians in Connecticut. Getting organized in the first place, was a difficult challenge that was successfully surmounted. The group still has only very limited funds raised from dues. Yet CONHASO appears to have great promise for the future because it recognizes and is addressing some basic needs.

UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT INITIATIVES

Several agencies at The University of Connecticut have recognized needs for their services in Haiti and tried to respond to them. Some of these efforts have come through the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. This Center has sponsored colloquia on Haitian affairs and organized field trips to Haiti. The School of Nursing has a project in Haiti to train local health personnel for rural clinics in Haiti. The Health Center in Farmington is also involved through its Center for International Community Health. The College of Agriculture and Natural Resources has also had several of its faculty undertake projects in Haiti.

Unfortunately, however, the plan for a University-wide Institute of International Affairs has not materialized, so the various efforts to work in Haiti are uncoordinated. They depend at present on individual initiative and the ability of groups to locate outside funding. Their impact at home and in Haiti can probably be greatly increased if it becomes possible to jointly plan, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions.

NOTES

1 The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1988. New York: Pharos Books, 1987, p. 604.

2 Joel Lang, "Birth Without Hope: Why Hartford Babies are Dying," Northeast, May 15, 1988, pp. 10-18, 33-34.

3 Mark Pazniokas, "Life in the Model City: Twenty Years after the Clay Hill riots, a lesson in Urban Betrayal," Northeast, May 1, 1988, PP. 14-22, 44-48.

4 The World Almanac, p. 682.

5 Rosalie M. Colman, "Fall of Duvalier leaves Haitians Wondering about Years to Come," The Advocate (Stamford, CT), March 7, 1986, p. A-11.

6 The interview with State Representative Vito Mazza was conducted by Renee Schatteman and has been summarized from a seminar paper on "Observations of Hunger Relief Development, Inc., and the Connecticut Haitian American Society" prepared for ESIM 408: International Development Education on May 4, 1988.

7 Andrea Kott, "Griswold Family will Open Diocesan Mission in Haiti," The Norwich Bulletin 127(336), December 2, 1986, pp. 1, 8.

8 Letter from Jeanne Bright, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to Frank A. Stone, Storrs, CT on April 25, 1988, p. 1.

9 Ibid., p. 9

10 Bylaws of The Connecticut Haitian American Society, Inc., March 12, 1987, p. 1. Bilingual, English-French.

11 Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Darius, East Hartford, CT by Renee Schatteman, summarized from her seminar paper cited in note six.

12 Ibid.

13 Bylaws, p. 1.